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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000284

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/ANP
NSC FOR JONES, CHA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/05/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND ELECTION DATE 2005: NOT NOW, I'M
WATCHING THE RUGBY

REF: WELLINGTON 70

Classified By: ACTING DCM KATHERINE HADDA, FOR REASONS 1.4(B,D)

¶11. (U) Summary: New Zealand's Labour Government is nearing the end of its three-year term and speculation is rife among the media and policymakers over the yet-to-be-determined election date. Many pundits believe Labour will call elections early, both in order to throw off the opposition's ability to mount an effective campaign and to guard against possible negative voter reaction if there is an economic downturn or other unforeseen controversy. Prime Minister Clark has indicated that the Party will go "full term," but even this could include any date between the Government's three-year anniversary in late July and September 24, the last Saturday before the September 27 cut-off date mandated under NZ's election law (reftel). Factors such as the winter rugby schedule, the release of the budget and the Cabinet's international political commitments will help determine the date. Regardless of the specifics, both Labour and the opposition are trying to use the public's increasing focus on election timing to highlight their parties' agendas. End summary.

Regulations

¶12. (U) Under NZ's electoral system, the Prime Minister decides on which date an election will be held. The Governor-General then dissolves Parliament by proclamation, and issues a second proclamation summoning Parliament to meet again several weeks after the election, although they are not bound to actually meet on that date. On what is known as Writ Day the Governor-General tells the Chief Electoral Officer to hold a general election, and polling is scheduled to occur on a Saturday, 20-27 days after nomination day. The day on which individual constituency candidate and party list nominations close is declared Nomination Day. In 2002, PM Clark announced the election on June 11, writ day was June 25, July 2 was nomination day and the election was held on July 27, 2002.

Why Wait? Timing Is Everything

¶13. (C) Incumbent politicians have historically been penalized for calling an early or snap election, and indications are that PM Clark wishes to go "full-term," or between July and September. Ultimately, the decision on timing is Clark's alone, and according to members of her staff she has not yet chosen a date. Cabinet Ministers Marian Hobbs and Chris Carter independently expressed to us their doubts over an early election, questioning how Labour could justify the decision to voters in the absence of any outside influence. They seem to believe such justification is needed in order to avoid voter perception that the Government is manipulating the process by holding elections when Labour's star is at its highest. Labour currently maintains a comfortable ten point polling lead over the Opposition National Party, and our contacts argue that there are no indications that their party's fortunes will change within the next six months. In addition, the Government's budget will be released on May 19th and its advertising campaign regarding its milestone "Working For Families" social welfare package is scheduled to peak in August. A late (Antipodean) winter election would assure Labour that publicity surrounding these financial packages impacts the maximum number of voters.

¶14. (C) The PM's Chief Press Spokesman, Mike Munro, also downplayed to us the likelihood of an early election. "It will be some time between July and September, so what's the fuss all about?" he said. Munro added that he did not really blame the media for hyping the issue, as the election is their biggest story of the year.

¶15. (U) Some have seen Labour's March release of its list of party candidates as a sign of an early election, but Labour delegates at the Party Congress insisted to us that the timing was designed to prevent candidates from focusing on their own possible list ranking instead of campaigning for the overall party vote. (Note: The higher the candidate's name is on the list, the more likely her or she is to gain a

seat in Parliament. (reftel)) A number of political parties in New Zealand have yet to finalize their Party Lists for the upcoming election. National expects to complete its list in June, as do the Greens.

16. (C) National Party leader Don Brash has publicly cited the early election buzz as proof that the Government is panicky over a worsening economic situation. (Brash, National Foreign Affairs Spokesman Lockwood Smith, and Welfare Spokesman Judith Collins have in the past all told us that it will be much harder for National to gain votes if the economy is doing well. It's not surprising, therefore, that they will use any chance they can to highlight any weakness in the system.) Brash has also used the media's interest in the election date to emphasize his party's readiness, publicizing National's strong party membership numbers, and point out that candidates have been selected in all 62 general electorates. On Party policy, Brash noted that National is waiting to "see the shape of the Labour Government's Budget on May 19," but indicated that most policy development has been completed though not yet revealed.

Can't Vote Now- The Footy's On

16. (U) While often referred to jokingly by policymakers, with NZ elections held on Saturdays the winter rugby season is a major determinant in scheduling an election. The British Lions rugby team will be playing heavily attended matches in NZ each weekend in June and early July. These games are not only a distraction from any political campaigning, but involve the movement of thousands of voters from their voting districts. August is similarly "full of footy" with Tri-Nations matches with Australia and South Africa serving as a source of great nationalism, and distracting from election year campaigning.

17. (C) Beyond football, PM Clark's foreign commitments may disrupt the September options. A United Nations Head of State or Government meeting in New York September 13) 16 is a powerful draw for Clark, especially as she has in the past expressed a desire to follow her NZ career with a high-profile UN position.

Comment

17. (C) While speculation is seen by some as a sport to while away the hours, Labour is approaching this election with great gravity, as noted in this past weekend's Labour Party Congress in Wellington. Complacency was derided by the PM, along with its "twin sister) arrogance." No Labour party has won a third term since the First Labour Government (1935-1949,) and economic indicators are increasingly pointing to a slowdown at the end of 2005. Finance Minister Michael Cullen, in talks at the Party Congress, repeatedly emphasized the impact an economic slowdown would have on Labour's ability to implement social policy. Labour is not taking anything for granted, and is weighing a number of factors in choosing a date that will optimize its polling advantage without allowing the Opposition time to mount a sustained attack. Whatever the date, media focus on this issue is a bellwether for increased voter awareness of election issues.

Burnett